

Keys of Requiem

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Summary: Time does not heal all wounds. Still raw from his loss of Cortana during his first mission on Requiem, John 117 decides to return with the UNSC Infinity and Fireteams Crimson and Majestic for answers. What he finds instead is a woman with a key to his past as well as his future.

1. John 117

Chapter 1. John 117

John 117 lay on the cool grass and gazed up at the stars like he used to do as a child. As he had back then, he still wondered what was out there. It had been 6 months since his last mission where he gained gifts from the Librarian of Requiem, but also lost Cortana, and he felt that even though the Didact was defeated that his mission was not yet completed. Something kept beckoning him back to Requiem. As much as she unsettled him, Chief knew he needed to somehow check in on Dr. Halsey to see what further findings she had uncovered about the Promethean planet.

She was now considered a criminal by the UNSC and he was under orders not to interact with her under any circumstances. Despite the UNSC's mistrust of Halsey's motives, they still recognized her value and brilliance as a scientist and allowed her to continue her work, provided she was monitored at all times. Chief decided that reviewing her research might give him the closure he needed.

He sat up. It had just grown dark. Her lab would be empty at this hour, and he could review the files she had to report to the UNSC on a daily basis. He was not sure whether he could trust Dr. Halsey's reports, but he felt drawn to her for information anyway. She was blunt, brilliant, and ruthless. If anyone knew anything about what was still happening on Requiem, it would be her, and she was so dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge that he thought her reports

would still contain kernels of truth, even if she did not reveal everything. Most of the scientists were afraid to get near any of the artifacts that the UNSC Infinity had brought back, but Halsey had the wisdom to treat the artifacts what they wereâ€”threats with secrets to tell. They were not toys to tinker with and she knew it.

Mind made up, Chief walked back to the base and got into a warthog to head to the lab. When he arrived, the area was quiet. He strode into the science building with his access key and made his way to Halsey's lab. Sure enough, Halsey's lab was empty and dark. He silently slid his access key in the door and crept inside.

Chief sat in a chair in front of the computer and eyed the Promethean artifact sitting on her lab table warily. It remained still and did not react to his presence. He let out a breath and turned on Halsey's computer to review her entries.

In her reports folder, her recorded entries were highly disappointing. The entries included dry descriptions of the artifacts, their behavior, and a few assumptions of their purpose. It was so unlike Halsey not to include anything deeper that Chief had a feeling in his gut that these were not her true notes. There was just enough detail to keep the UNSC satisfied, but he knew that there was more. He began clicking through all of her folders, not finding anything out of the ordinary. The other folders contained much of the same. Chief began to get frustrated and was just about to give up for the night when he clicked on a folder called "Miscellaneous transcriptions." To the naked eye, it just looked like a jumble of code that Halsey may be trying to decipher from the relics. However, Chief immediately recognized the series of symbols as the special alphabet code that the original Spartans were taught to communicate with each other and no one else. Only an original Spartan and Dr. Halsey knew of the existence of the code. Chief's heart beat faster in anticipation as he began to decipher the code:

While most of these artifacts are lifeless pieces of Promethean history, a few of the newest relics that I have been studying have revealed some interesting breakthroughs. A repetition of symbols and a drawing that looks like a map suggest there is a key still on Requiem that could fully unlock the secret of Requiem's power. Without the key, I am only scratching at the surface, uncovering only recent memories of the Prometheans. There is a piece missing; there must be some way to investigate the planet further to fully understand the extent of Promethean knowledge and technology. I think it is related to the "Librarian," wife of Didact and keeper of Requiem's secrets. Perhaps this map leads to her. Note to review my findings on the Librarian to confirm this assumption._

Chief paused in his reading. Captain Lasky of the UNSC Infinity was planning a return trip to Requiem in two days. As he studied the map and the symbols that he unlocked using the Spartan code, he made a decision. He needed to go back. Pulling his memory card from his pocket that he could later plug in to his helmet, he copied all of Halsey's notes from the folder, including the map.

Chief knew there were younger Spartans that were now relied upon for the special missions that remained on Requiem. He recognized that he was frequently seen as an older soldier, only called upon in times of great need. It was almost an advantage that so many of them underestimated him; he could often go on solo missions and work much

faster without anyone watching over his movements. He also knew that Lasky would let him go along on the Infinity because he, more than anyone, understood his need for closure. He would not deceive Lasky. Any findings that he uncovered on Requiem, he would share. First thing in the morning, he would request permission to return to Requiem to collect further field reports.

2. Return to Requiem

Chapter 2. Return to Requiem

Chief arrived on the UNSC Infinity by 08:00 two days later. The launch pad was a buzz of activity as the crew made final preparations for departure. Since he was suited up in his armor, he towered over everyone. He entered the ship and headed up to the command deck where Lasky was sure to be. As he made his way through the crowd, several crew members nodded his way and said "Chief."

When he reached the bridge, Lasky turned to greet him.

"I'm glad you'll be joining us for this trip, Chief. Any particular reason other than to collect field reports?" Lasky's tone was friendly, but Chief could sense that the question went deeper than that. Lasky and Chief had barely spoken after their brief conversation on board the Infinity after Chief lost Cortana. Lasky was one of the few who understood his connection with Cortana and his need to mourn her loss. Most always assumed that Spartans had no human element, but Lasky was different, assuring Chief that soldiers are not machines.

"I need to return to Requiem for some closure. There is something I need to find."

Lasky nodded, not requiring the Chief to elaborate further. "Well, you're always welcome aboard. We may need you." He smiled grimly. "Let me know if there is anything I can do."

Chief turned away and left Captain Lasky to finish preparing for takeoff.

He was headed to Requiem.

3. An Unexpected Encounter

Chapter 3. An Unexpected Encounter

Chief stood on the command deck of the ship, watching as UNSC Infinity approached Requiem. The planet flickered like a blue gem as light from nearby stars reflected off its surface.

Captain Lasky turned to Chief.

"Our mission is to clear out remaining Covenant and Promethean forces so that we can set up research bases here. Please keep your IFF tag with you so I can contact you if we have any trouble." He reached up and put his hand on Chief's shoulder. "Be careful out there. I hope you find whatever you're looking for."

As he turned to leave, Chief nodded a greeting to Commander Palmer, who was also on the command deck, preparing to deploy Fireteams Crimson and Majestic. John could tell by the cursory nod she gave him that she did not agree with Captain Lasky's willingness to let Chief wander around on Requiem without a mission.

"Don't cause trouble for my Fireteams, Chief."

"Would not dream of it, Commander."

Chief joined the other Fireteams on the Pelican set to dispatch to Requiem and silently buckled up. The other Spartans eyed him curiously, but they had their own missions to prepare for and did not ask him too many questions. Good, small talk was not his strong suit, and he did not care for the Fireteam Majestic much, particularly the team leader, Paul DeMarco, who he thought was too cocky for his own good.

After the Pelican landed on Requiem, Chief took his leave of the other Fireteams and proceeded towards the dense forest so that they could not see him pulling out the maps and data he had pulled from Halsey's computer. There were a lot of memories on this planet with Cortana. He wanted to visit some of the sites they went to together before her rampancy became so severe.

As he wandered alone through the forest, he realized just how much he missed her and her clever and sarcastic comments. He paused. Maybe he should not be doing this. When he was not in his armor out on a mission, it was easier. But now, suited up, on a planet they had explored together, a pit of loneliness and grief opened up inside of him. He took a deep breath. He knew Cortana would not want him to stop being a Spartan because she was gone. She had always looked out for him, and now he needed to look out for himself. Glancing down at his map, again, Chief checked the coordinates and kept moving through the forest.

A few hours later, he had seen no sign of Covenant or Promethean forces and was beginning to doubt the legitimacy of Halsey's maps and notes. Then, his radar showed movement up ahead, but it had not been flagged as a threat. He did not think it could be Covenant or Promethean since they almost never travelled alone and their signature was easily recognized by his armor. This was different. He crept closer and peered through the trees, trying to see what creature was alone in this area of the forest.

That was when he saw her. She was sitting at the small creek that ran through the forest drinking water from her hands. Her blonde hair spilled over her shoulder and water drops fell from her hands like diamonds. She looked up and stared at the tree he was hiding behind. "I know you're back there, Spartan. Show yourself."

Chief stepped forward, impressed that she knew he was there. He glanced around warily, hoping he had not just walked into a trap. "Don't worry, Spartan. It is just me. You found me because I wanted to be found."

He looked at her skeptically and folded his arms across his chest. "I highly doubt that. Why are you out here by yourself in the first place?"

"I was marooned here and I have learned to blend in to survive. This isn't the best place to vacation considering all of the Prometheans and Covenant roaming about. Why are you here?"

"I am on a mission to find something. You cannot stay here. I can get you to the UNSC Infinity so that you will be safe."

"I won't be any safer on the UNSC Infinity. I can take care of myself."

Chief rolled his eyes at her stubbornness. "I am not going to stand here and argue with you. I'm offering you protection and a ride home. Take it or leave it." As he said those words, he knew they weren't true. He would not be leaving her behind, regardless of her answer. He never left anyone behind. He could tell that she knew that too.

"Fine. But only if Iâ€" she broke off, whipping around to look through the trees behind her. As she held up a hand for silence, four enemy dots appeared on his screen.

He also peered through the trees and pulled out his DMR, preparing for battle. "Get behind me. I will take care of this." He looked next to him to make sure she would follow orders, but she was gone. He moved forward, preparing to take on the enemy. The dots began disappearing off his screen. He saw an elite fall to the ground, a knife protruding from his neck. Two grunts also fell, and Chief lifted his DMR and took out the remaining jackal.

"Alright." Chief muttered. "You proved your point. But you are still coming with me. Where did you get the cloaking armor? I've never seen such sophisticated equipment before, even in our Spartan armor."

She smirked as she reappeared back at his side. "I have my sources. Now we need to move. There are more coming." She quickly retrieved her throwing knives and a few grenades from the fallen Covenant and began to head deeper into the woods. "You coming with me?"

"We could just stay and fight. There are only seven of them."

"Yes, but it is just as easy to avoid them. There are plenty more around here that you will need to shoot at. Humor me."

Chief hesitated, his habit to kill Covenant at every opportunity warring with her logical argument. "Fine. Let's move."

4. Jess

Chapter 4. Jess

"You really aren't much of a talker are you?" the blonde woman remarked as they moved through the forest. They had been moving quickly for about two hours and the Spartan had not said more than two words. He had not even asked about her name.

"Fine. I will start." She chattered. "My name is Jess. What's yours?"

"John." The Spartan looked down at her and though she could not see

his face through his orange visor, she could sense that he was smirking at her sarcastic tone when he responded. At least he had a sense of humor. She had heard most Spartans were emotionless war machines, but she had a feeling that for some, the human element never really disappeared.

"Well, John. Do you want to tell me why you are out here by yourself? I've been on Requiem for a while, and I might be able to help you find what you're looking for."

Chief pondered her offer silently. He knew virtually nothing about this woman except that she was beautiful, not bothered by his silent demeanor, and could run with him without getting winded. He really should not trust her. She had state of the art battle armor that was tailored to her petite frame, which was not accessible to just anyone. While she was not a Spartan, she obviously knew battle techniques and was in excellent physical shape.

Was she a spy sent by Commander Palmer to see what he was up to? He promptly discarded that possibility. Commander Palmer was a lot of things, but subtle was not one of them. If she really had a concern about Chief going on Requiem alone, she would have brought it up with Captain Lasky, not gone through the trouble of recruiting a female to spy on him. Additionally, if this woman had been on board the Infinity, he would have remembered her. She had a delicate heart-shaped face, curves in the right places that he could still see through her light armor, and green eyes that reflected the deep color of the forest around them.

She continued to wait patiently, her eyes looking at him curiously as he decided what to do. "Is this a secret mission you are on, then? Please let me help. I could keep you company."

Chief winced at that. Cortana had always been the one to keep him company. He looked into her eyes, trying to determine if there was any sign she was lying to him or using him.

"Why are you so hesitant to return to the Infinity?" he finally asked.

She looked down. "I don't have many friends there. I am doing better on my own." She paused. "I'm used to being alone. Today, I didn't hide because it's been such a long time since I've talked to another person. I just couldn't resist." Sadness and regret crept into her voice and Chief knew that she was sincere.

He understood what it was like to be forced into isolation, and this woman did not seem like the type to handle it well. He made a decision. He hoped that his gut was not wrong.

"Alright. You can help. But then, we really need to talk about what to do about you. The Infinity is here to clear out the Prometheans and Covenant so they can set up research bases. You cannot hide from them forever."

She nodded. "You make a good point. We can discuss that when you complete your mission. Now, what are you looking for?"

"It is some sort of Promethean key that unlocks some of the artifacts collected from this planet. Other teams have been dispatched to

search for remaining artifacts, but Dr. Halsey's notes said that the key is the secret to unlocking them all."

At the mention of Dr. Halsey, Jess jumped. "What is it?" Chief asked. "Do you know her?"

"The name does sound familiar, but I cannot place it." Chief continued to watch her curiously. A link between this woman and Halsey would certainly be interesting, and something to be wary of.

He continued. "The key is most likely small and we are not sure if the Prometheans or Covenant are aware of it. Most likely, it is on a part of the planet that was inhabited by the most ancient of the Forerunners. It may be hidden in a temple or a shrine."

Jess paused for a minute, pondering his words. "There is one place. It is probably at least two days' worth of travel from here. There is a buried fortress that looks like a temple. I have gone there sometimes to hide. I have never encountered anything odd there, but then again, I never knew to look."

Chief pulled out the maps from Halsey's reports. "Where do you think it would be on here?"

Jess took the map and studied it, finally pointing to a place at the base of a mountain range where several symbols from Halsey's notes were also listed. Chief thought that was worth investigating and entered the coordinates into his armor's tracking and set a waypoint. Sure enough, it was at least two days away. "We had better get moving. We have a lot of ground to cover."

5. Memories

**Chapter 5. Memories **

Jess glanced quickly at the silent Spartan that moved at her side. He had slowed his pace a little bit, apparently satisfied now that she had proved she could keep up with him if needed. He did not say much, but for some reason she liked him. He had a large physical presence, standing at least a head and shoulders over her, even though she was tall for a woman. His size did not make her nervous though; instead, she felt safe. While she felt that he could act as a protector, she could also see the wear and tear on his armor and thought this was a man that always looked out for everyone else and deserved to have someone return the favor. She wondered what his face looked like. How old would he be? His voice was low and slightly gravelly, but it did not give her any indication of what his age could be.

"Doesn't wearing your helmet all the time bother you?" she blurted into the silence. He paused and looked down at her.

"I always try to be ready for anything. I'm used to wearing my armor for extended periods of time. Why do you ask?"

She reddened and looked away, unwilling to admit that the reason for her question stemmed from her desire to know what her new travel companion looked like.

He seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. "Very few people have seen what is beneath the helmet. They don't seem to mind, why do you care to know?"

"That is not why I asked."

He paused and turned to face her, his frame towering over her and casting her in shadow. "You are a terrible liar. Remember that."

Her temper ignited at his arrogant tone. "What is that supposed to mean? I have not been hiding anything from you. How dare you imply that I am planning to do that now? I'm helping you."

"You are a fugitive, alone on a hostile planet. Are you sure I am not the one helping you?" he fired back.

"I have been here for a long time and I have taken care of myself. I know the terrain as well as any Forerunner." She spread out her arms. "You are travelling alone, and are unfamiliar with the area. You don't even have an A.I. to provide you with guidance! Who is at a higher risk here?"

He stiffened and Jess knew she had pushed him too far. His voice dropped and he stepped closer to her. "I am familiar with this area, and I used to have an A.I. She sacrificed herself to save me on our last mission. Our last mission was here." He angrily pointed at the ground. "I chose to do this mission alone and I'm perfectly capable of handling it."

"I am sorry. I did not know. Iâ€" "

"So you want to know about the aging Spartan that goes out alone, without even an A.I. for company?" His hands went to the seals of his helmet as he tore it off in anger. "Well, here you are."

Jess stumbled back, as she met stormy blue eyes that reflected all of the pain that she had heard in his voice when she brought up the A.I. Whoever the A.I. had been, this Spartan still deeply mourned her. She slowly took in the rest of him. His skin was fair, probably from being in armor all the time, and he had dark brown hair that framed his face. He had a strong chin and straight nose, but the feature that drew her was the scar that ran under his right eye. His face was not handsome, but it was compelling and she continued to stare. He lookedâ€"familiar. She looked away quickly as recognition slammed into her. While he had aged and his eyes revealed the burdens he had carried through the years, the boy she knew long ago was still there. She paled and bit her lip hoping that he did not see the spark of recognition pass through her eyes.

He did not. "I didn't think I looked that bad, but I have not looked in a mirror in a while." He put his helmet back on. "I won't bother you with my face again."

She hesitated, aching that he had misinterpreted her reaction for repulsion, but she was unsure how to reassure him without revealing herself. They lapsed into a tense silence and continued to move through the forest.

Chief looked over at the woman at his side. Before she had reminded

him, rather cruelly, about his loss of Cortana, he had enjoyed her company. She was vibrant and witty and jumped from topic to topic, telling him everything she knew about the planet and its current inhabitants. Her voice was low and similar to Cortana's voice in many ways, which oddly had soothed him. Now, she walked silently next to him, her face so pale she looked like she had seen a ghost. He did not think the years had taken that large of a toll on him, but maybe he was wrong. He had been really raw since the loss of Cortana and his anger and bitterness probably showed on his face.

A thought slammed into him. She did not know about Cortana. She could not have understood how deep her comment could have cut into him. He had probably been too harsh, and he felt a sudden need to get her talking again, if just to fill the silence and get his mind off of Cortana.

He took a stab at conversation. "This sunken temple we are going to-" he started. She glanced up at him warily, nodding her head. "You mentioned that you go there to hide. What is this place like?"

She relaxed a little as she recalled the location. "I have not been there in some time, but it's a special place that reminds me of home. It is in a large cavern with surfaces covered in moss and large waterfalls and streaks of sunlight pouring in from above. I have a ladder that I put together to get up behind one of the waterfalls. Without the ladder, the cave behind it is virtually invisible. I feel safe there. I'll show you the location when we get there."

He continued to ask her simple questions, hoping that the tension of the earlier moments would soon pass. She responded to his question with some of the same energy she had shown before, relieved to move beyond their earlier argument. However, after some time, she did pause and placed her hand lightly on his arm. He glanced down at her hand and met her deep green eyes that stared up at him beseechingly. "I do hope you will accept my apology for earlier. My temper got the better of me and I deeply wounded you. Please forgive me for my outburst."

He nodded and moved away from her hand. "Thank you."

6. Wayward Thoughts

Chapter 6. Wayward Thoughts

After selecting a spot to make camp for the night, Jess settled in and looked at Chief. "So, does everyone call you John or do you have some other name you go by?"

He shrugged. "Almost everyone calls me Chief."

She eyed the medals on his armor that marked him as a chief petty officer and smiled. Chief suited him. "I can see that. Would you like me to call you Chief instead of John?"

He jumped. He had been leaning against a tree with his eyes closed when she said his title and she sounded just like Cortana. This was getting weird. Maybe he was going crazy. This woman did so many things just like Cortana used to. She teased him, argued with him, and spoke to him in that smoky voice of hers. It was getting

ridiculous. He shifted, unable to get comfortable, especially with the odd direction his thoughts were taking.

Jess moved over to him and slowly reached up to release his helmet. She smiled at him as she met his blue eyes. "You never answered my question."

He just stared at her, trying to understand how she could be so repulsed by his face a few hours ago and then suddenly voluntarily remove his helmet and smile at him. She did not move as he reached up to touch her face. She tilted her head into his hand as he drew his hand over her face and she closed her eyes. With her eyes closed, she looked younger and vulnerable. And familiar. He drew his hand back quickly as her eyes opened and she read the surprise etched in his face.

She immediately looked down into her lap and moved away. She tried to clear her throat and speak. No words would emerge. There is no way he could have recognized her. It was impossible, but he remained still and she could feel his eyes on her. She made a show of settling in to sleep. While it eluded her for a while, somehow she eventually slipped into a fitful sleep.

Chief remained alert the rest of the night, thinking about what could have caused the spark of recognition that jolted through him as he had looked into her face.

7. A Simple Skirmish

Chapter 7. A Simple Skirmish

Unlike the first day, the second day dawned stormy and gray. Chief tossed Jess her helmet and she put it on, cringing as it settled over her damp hair. She hated days like this. Not only was the weather crummy, but she felt exhausted from tossing and turning all night. She shook her head as she tried to clear out the negative thoughts and focus on the trip ahead. The fine hairs at her nape prickled.

"Covenant forces are close." Chief murmured. "And they're in our way." Jess glanced at Chief as he prepared his DMR for the impending battle with the Covenant. "You know, Chief, you do not need to just barge in there and throw your weight around. We could just avoid them." Chief glanced over at her, opened his mouth to argue and stopped. She was grinning and opening her throwing knife kit and preparing her invisibility armor.

"You know I always take the direct approach."

She nodded, tossed a cheeky grin over her shoulder and disappeared, her invisibility armor activated. Chief had a knot in his stomach. While he was thrilled that she was not going to stop him like she had before, he now worried that she would be hurt. He was a Spartan. He could take a lot of hits and keep going. She was an ordinary human woman. She could not withstand the damage that he could. He shook his head and sought focus. Jess had survived this long, so if he could keep the attention on himself, she would be fine. And she was anything but ordinary; he was beginning to realize that.

He ran up to the rocks and took aim at the nearest Elite only to see a throwing knife sink into its neck as it dropped silently. Chief began taking down the grunts and drawing the attention of the elites. Jess continued to throw her knives with deadly accuracy and also threw out a few grenades she had pilfered from the grunts. Chief rushed into the fray to push the Covies further back, not relenting until the last grunt fell. No reinforcements appeared on his radar and Chief nodded to indicate to Jess that the area was clear. She turned off her invisibility armor and Chief started in surprise. She was standing right next to him. Her stealth abilities were even better than he had imagined.

"Are you sure you have not had any formal military training?" he asked. She tossed her long blonde curls, which still somehow looked appealing to him despite the fact that her helmet had turned it into a tangle. "Not formal training, but I did learn a few things from my family." He waited. She did not elaborate.

"Well you do need to learn how to shoot because you are not going to be able to pick up your knives after every battle."

"Why not? You never leave any survivors."

Chief paused. She did have a point. "Ok. Well, I'll feel better if you knew how to shoot so you can turn to guns if you run out of knives."

She shrugged. "Alright. We can investigate the area a bit further and then practice. I know how to shoot a gun by the way; I just have not practiced much with precision weapons."

Chief could not suppress a tightening in his gut. This lesson was going to be fun.

8. Target Practice

Chapter 8. Target Practice

Jess and Chief encountered three more groups of Covenant before the area was quiet. Jess liked thinking of John as Chief when they were dealing with enemy forces because the name suited him so well. He always remained calm in the face of battle and he took risks, but none that he could not handle. She was always overly cautious when she was by herself because hand-to-hand combat was not her strong suit, but with Chief fighting next to her, she found her confidence growing. She was also learning a few new moves. His assassination of the Elite today was something she hoped she could get him to teach her after their shooting practice.

Chief paced out an area and began marking trees with leaves and pieces of Covenant armor he had saved from their last skirmish. Jess leaned against a tree and watched him move around the area in preparation for their shooting lesson. When he strode back and stood right in front of her, Jess was struck yet again by his physical presence. He really was enormous, and while he was a man of few words, he often communicated his thoughts and feelings through body language. Jess found it fascinating. She had always been a more verbal communicator, but she found that she liked Chief's style more and more.

"Are you ready for your lesson?" Chief asked.

She nodded and stepped closer to him. He handed her his DMR. "We will start with this and then move up to the sniper rifle after you have had some time to get used to using the DMR."

She picked up the DMR and settled it against her shoulder. He moved to her side and braced a hand on her elbow and checked her stance. He explained how to line up the reticle and then he gestured towards the first target. She took aim and fired.

Chief stared in amazement. She had hit the target dead center. She was either an eerily gifted natural markswoman or she had more experience with precision weapons than she let on. He was not going to stop the lesson though. He was enjoying standing close to her and watching as she focused on the target. Especially since her body always seemed to sway towards his, making him think he needed to reconsider what her initial reaction to him meant.

He had always liked working on his marksmanship, but it was rare to find a woman whose focus seemed to match his own. He smiled to himself as she hit target after target. She was practicing with her helmet on and off, since it required her to view the reticle differently. Chief particularly liked when she did not have her helmet on because he could watch her lips press together as she lined up the shot and then break into a slight smile of satisfaction as she hit her target.

He pulled the sniper rifle off his back and handed it to her. "Now let's try this one." She grinned in anticipation. She laid flat on a low rock with the sniper resting in front of her as Chief adjusted her position and explained how to use the scope. He lingered next to her longer than he probably should have but he did not care. He was still trying to understand his attraction to her. She brought back memories from long ago that he could not place, but this desire to be close to her was entirely new. She had the body of a goddess, voice and sense of humor like Cortana, and bravery that he did often see in others. He knew he should not be letting himself feel anything for her, but it just felt right. He always felt disconnected from most of humanity, but with her, he did not feel alone.

She was not as gifted with the sniper rifle at first, but after several minutes of practice, she was soon consistently hitting the distant targets that Chief had marked. Chief nodded with satisfaction. "You're good at this. Would you like to carry one of these weapons for the next time we need them?"

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I thought Spartans did not part with any of their weapons."

He shrugged. "I have three to choose from currently and I prefer to carry two. Plus, you have proved yourself to be more than capable of using them."

She smiled, pleased with his compliment. She gazed at the DMR and the sniper rifle for a minute and then turned to him and plucked his pistol from his holster.

With a sly grin she said, "I think I will carry the pistol for now

and leave the heavy lifting for you. I know where the DMR and sniper rifle are if I need them."

He placed the sniper rifle on the back of his armor and grabbed the DMR while she strapped her new pistol to her thigh. Chief had to admit that it looked better on her than it did on him. He started to move ahead when she stopped him.

"Could you teach me how you assassinated that Elite today?" Jess asked. When Chief did not respond, her brows drew together. "You don't think I could do it," she stated, disappointment oozing from her voice.

Chief paused and turned to face her. He did not like the thought of her getting that close to an Elite, but at the same time, he knew it would help her to know as much as possible to defend herself if needed. He relented.

"If I teach you this, you must promise me you'll be careful. An Elite is extremely strong and can severely wound or kill you if they know you're coming."

She nodded. "I understand. I'll be careful."

Chief then proceeded to show her how to use an Elite's armor to climb up their body to perform the assassination. "You need to make sure that the Elite's back is completely turned. Otherwise, he'll have a chance to strike out at you," he explained. After he finished describing the move, he then turned around so his back was to Jess. "Alright, let's see what you learned."

Jess stood there mutely, gazing at Chief's back. Her heart hammered in her chest and she was distracted by how she was about to literally climb his body. She slowly approached, struggling to plan how she would attack. Chief turned and caught her arm as she was about to make her move. He scowled down at her. "Don't you ever assassinate an Elite. Forget I taught you anything. I could hear you coming and they will too."

Jess eyed her arm, which was still in Chief's grasp and met his stormy gaze. Her breathing hitched. He was so close. And so disappointed at her failure. Pride immediately extinguished her momentary distraction at Chief's proximity. She could do this. Jess yanked her arm away and took several steps back. "Let me try again," she said with calm determination. Chief turned again and waited. Jess activated her invisibility armor as she would if she were attacking an Elite. Her focus narrowed, her distraction about touching Chief vanished. She crept forward.

Chief stood still, waiting for Jess to attack. He had been angry that she had been so careless on her first attempt. He had visions of an Elite striking her a deadly blow that had made him immediately regret allowing her to think she could perform an assassination. His stance shifted as he waited. There were no sounds except those natural to the forest. Chief wondered if Jess had moved at all.

He was unprepared for the quick attack he received from Jess. She launched herself at him and climbed his armor so quickly with a knife pressed to his throat that he hadn't even had a chance to turn around. Satisfaction surged through him. "Better," he grunted as Jess

slide back down his body and walked around to face him, her hands on her hips.

"They won't ever hear me coming," she promised. And Chief knew then that it was true. Whatever carelessness had possessed her the first time was gone and he knew it wouldn't return. Chief motioned for her to follow as they left their makeshift training field, moving deeper into the forest.

9. A Favor for Commander Palmer

Chapter 9. A Favor for Commander Palmer

They had not gone far when Chief suddenly got a surprising transmission from Commander Palmer.

"Chief," Palmer's voice came in through the static. "I would not be in your ear unless it was important."

Chief put his finger to the responder on his helmet. "I'm listening. Go ahead, Commander Palmer."

"Fireteam Majestic was recently deployed in your area and I've lost contact with them. They were taking heavy fire from both Covenant and Promethean forces and I think they could use some back up. I will send you a waypoint."

"Understood. Chief, out."

Jess stood waiting for him. "Well, are we taking a detour?"

Chief nodded. "It will most likely be dangerous, Jess. You do not have to come with me."

She shook her head. "I'm coming with you. I am much safer with you than I am anywhere alone on this planet. Plus, you may be able to use my help."

He nodded. "Alright, I have the waypoint. Let's move."

10. Fireteam Majestic

Chapter 10. Fireteam Majestic

As Chief and Jess approached the waypoint Palmer had set, their radar screens began to light up with red dots.

"No wonder they needed help," Jess mumbled. "How do you want to handle this, Chief?"

Chief crouched down and gestured for Jess to follow suit. As they peered through the rocks, they saw the Spartan team pinned behind a series of rocks opposite them as a Promethean Knight, standing atop a tall rock, rained incineration cannon blasts down on their position. Jess eyed the rock face where the Knight was standing, his back to them. "We can probably get up there undetected if we crouch and move quietly, Chief. If we can eliminate that Knight, the team should be able to clear out the rest of the enemies fairly quickly." Jess

looked to Chief to see if he agreed.

Chief nodded. "It's risky, but it should be effective, especially since his back is turned. Can you make sure that any enemies between us and the Knight are killed quietly? We don't want the Knight to hear us coming."

Jess unsheathed her throwing knives. "I'll be ready, Chief."

"Alright. You will need to stay close since we'll both be in active camouflage. If the Knight does see us, try to get back as fast as possible. The incineration cannon is extremely powerful and will tear through your armor."

They activated their invisibility armor and began to slowly creep forward, Chief leading. Jess silently downed any wayward enemies that got too close before they could sound the alarm, while Chief kept his eye on the Knight, looking for any sign it knew they were approaching. However, it did not turn around and continued to fire the cannon at the Fireteam, which was busy taking down the enemies that had approached and crept behind the rocks where they were taking cover. Chief continued to press forward, Jess' hand resting on his back to ensure she stayed with him.

Once they reached the rock face, Chief began to climb, while Jess waited below, ensuring no enemies could attack from behind. Once Chief climbed to the top, he crouched and waited. After firing another shot, the Knight paused and looked down at its weapon as it recharged. Seizing his window of opportunity, Chief launched himself at the Knight, climbing up its body before yanking down its face and ramming its own sword into its chest. The Knight dissolved into a cloud of glittering dust, only the memory purge remaining to glimmer in the air.

Jess gaped in amazement at the show of strength, but did not have time to dwell on it. Chief dropped down beside her and turned off his invisibility. "Circle along the outside of this field and join the Fireteam behind the rocks. I'll push forward from here and join you afterward."

Jess grabbed Chief's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Be careful," she whispered. He nodded and then charged out into the fray.

Jess circled back and collected her throwing knives before making her way around the battlefield towards the rocks Chief had indicated. Now that the Knight was dead, the Fireteam had pushed forward to help Chief. While most of the Fireteam members were busy shooting at the Elites that had appeared, but Jess noticed that one Spartan was slumped behind the rocks. She ran up to him and immediately saw the large needle spike that protruded from his armor between his shoulder and chest plate. She crouched down and deactivated her invisibility armor.

"Can you hear me Spartan?" She asked as she took a closer look at the wound. Spartan armor typically could withstand a lot of needle rifle shots, but this one had somehow worked its way between the armor plates. Jess looked at his armor and saw it had taken heavy damage.

"Yes, I can hear you, ma'am. Not sure what you can do." He started to sit up. "It's not that big of a deal--"

"What is your name, Spartan?" Jess interrupted to distract him from what she was about to do.

"Spartan Thorne, ma'am. Iâ€™E®

Jess leaned forward and swiftly pulled the needle out of his armor as the Spartan groaned in pain. She began sifting through her utility pack to find the powder that sealed a wound. Her helmet was restricting her vision and she yanked it off, her blonde air spilling around her shoulders.

She was so busy digging through her pack, that she did not hear his gasp of surprise. After locating the powder, she immediately poured it on the Spartan's wound as he sucked in a breath.

She was in the process of tying the wound with strips of cloth when the rest of the Fireteam gathered around. Apparently Chief had been extremely effective with clearing out the area.

"And just who might you be?" an arrogant voice said from behind her.

Jess snapped her head around to meet the eyes of the Fireteam leader, a man she instantly disliked. His eyes looked her over in a way that made her want to squirm.

She scowled at him, hoping that the Chief would return. "Helping a member of your Spartan team that you failed to protect," she shot back.

His eyebrows shot up and he sent her a mocking smile. "I will let that comment slide since you are so easy on the eyes. Now, it's highly unlikely that you came with the Chiefâ€™"

"And why would that be, DeMarco?" a deep voice came from behind the Fireteam leader, causing Jess to sigh with relief.

DeMarco took a step back. "Are you serious, Chief? You have been with her? Who is she?" His eyes shifted to Jess again.

Chief took a step forward and did not say anything else.

Thorne removed his helmet with a grimace and met Jess' eyes, changing the subject after sensing the tension radiating from the Chief. "Well, despite that horrid powder you put on my shoulder, I want to thank you for coming to our assistance. It will be much easier to travel back to the ship without a needle protruding from my arm."

Jess nodded gratefully, hoping that DeMarco would not continue to ask questions.

Chief did not give him the chance. He activated his transmitter for Commander Palmer.

"Well that was quick, Chief." She said after he provided his report. "Thank you for your assistance. I am sending an evac Pelican

now. "

"DeMarco." Palmer's scathing voice came across the transmission. "What the hell were you thinking taking your team into that area without prior authorization? If the Chief had not been in the areaâ€" "

Jess caught Chief's eye and they began heading towards the forest without looking back. While most of the Fireteam grinned at each other as DeMarco took a severe tongue lashing from Palmer, Thorne watched Chief and the beautiful woman walk away.

"I am now going to be like you and never take off my helmet," he heard her say to Chief with disgust as she slammed it back on her head. "It is just easier if they never see your face." The Chief started laughing and leaned closer to her as she continued ranting.

Thorne rubbed his eyes in amazement and blinked, thinking that the injury had done more damage than he initially thought. But the scene before him remained the same. He continued to stare after the pair until they melted into the forest, wondering to himself what a woman like that was doing on this planet and how she had managed to make the Chief laugh.

11. Stargazing

Chapter 11. Stargazing

Chief and Jess had moved quickly that afternoon, trying to make up time they had lost by changing their course to assist Fireteam Majestic. After all of the activity that day, Jess was ready for rest. Chief sensed that she was tiring and selected a spot for them to camp for the night.

Jess and Chief sat and ate some of the small snacks they kept in their utility packs. They relaxed in easy silence, enjoying a much deserved break after such a busy day.

"You took your helmet off in front of those Spartans and they did not recognize you. So who is it you are worried will find you?"

Jess looked away, torn whether she should tell him the truth. She did not have the courage right then. "It goes further back than those young Spartans," she replied vaguely.

Chief hesitated. He wanted to probe further, but he could tell that she would open up soon enough. He already felt closer to her than he did with any other person and they had only been traveling together for a little over a day. He realized that he had started to place trust in her. During the attack today, he had placed trust in her to watch his back, allowing him to take down the Knight. He typically did not rely on others to get the job done. The only other being he had ever trusted fully had been Cortana. And just like Cortana, Jess seemed not to mind risky plans and she seemed to care for him.

Not wanting to disrupt the comfortable balance they had created over the course of the day, he changed the subject.

"When we first met, you told me to avoid enemies. But today, you were willing to jump right into the fray with me. What changed your mind?"

Jess smiled at him. "Fishing for compliments are we?" She paused, meeting his eyes directly. "You did, Chief. You are a brilliant soldier and I trust you in a fight. But most importantly, you are lucky. You can dive headlong into battle and emerge with almost no damage. That combination of natural leadership ability and luck, that is what makes you a hero. A hero I would gladly follow into whatever fight you thought we could win."

Chief sucked in a breath, stunned by words that were so close to those that Cortana had spoken to him all those years ago. Leadership and luck. Was that what it took to be a hero? He had to play the hero earlier today for Fireteam Majestic and he still remembered how angry he had become when he had seen DeMarco arrogantly talking to Jess, oblivious to how much she and Chief had risked to save their skin. Chief had wanted to smash his fist into DeMarco's face. However, the look of relief that had appeared in Jess' eyes when he had stepped in on her behalf had almost knocked him off his feet. The burden of being everyone's hero had taken its toll, but being Jess' heroâ€¦.well that felt different.

After they finished eating, Jess suddenly stood and grabbed Chief's hand, leading him away from their camp to an open clearing. She plopped down in the grass and patted the ground next to her. Chief stood looking down at her, his memory stirring. He slowly sat next to her and she lay back on the grass. "Look at the sky, John. You can see the stars." For a few minutes he simply lay there in the grass staring up at the night sky and listening to her breathing. At one point her hand crept across the distance between them and settled within his. It felt so right and so similar to long ago. He was torn between saying anything to her about the past. It just had to be a coincidenceâ€¦"You know," she whispered "as a child I used to lay outside and stare at the sky and wonder what was out there, and now look at me, on another planet."

Startled, Chief sat up and stared at her, all the puzzle pieces falling in to place. "It is you," he breathed. He reached out and curled a tendril of hair around his finger as he searched her face for any resemblance to the little girl he once knew and thought he had lost when he had been a teenager. "You're Dr. Halsey's daughter. She told me you had died. "

Her eyes widened as she met his eyes. "I have been afraid to tell you, but I could not resist having a moment like this with you again. Our nights spent stargazing are some of my favorite childhood memories."

At her words, anger, an emotion he did not often feel or express, burned through him, hot and bright. "You knew and you did not tell me? Why?"

"Would you have believed me? I have been thought dead by everyone I knew for my own protection. My mother is a notorious scientist with many enemies and many others who want to manipulate her to get what she knows. I was not military like my half-sister, and I was threatened so many times that she thought it best to hide me away. I could not tell anyone, including you." She reached up and touched his

cheek, regret shining in her eyes as a single tear slid down her cheek. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, John. I never wanted to do that."

At her touch, Chief reached up to wipe the tear from her face, the moisture glowing like a crystal in the moonlight on his thumb. He looked down into her face and felt the anger seep out of him as he went numb with shock. She was alive.

He lay back down in the grass, still trying to absorb the truth. All this time, Halsey had lied to him. She had known how close he had become with Jess when he was constantly being beaten up in Spartan training. Halsey had known that the one thing that had kept him anchored to humanity had been the innocent nights staring up at the stars with a bright-eyed, blonde-haired girl. And Halsey had taken her from him so that he could completely immerse himself in his Spartan training, learning to cut off all human emotion to deal with the grief of Jess' supposed death.

So many things began to make sense to him. He felt comfortable with her because deep down, somehow he still knew her. Years of self-loathing for not being able to protect her were stripped away, leaving Chief raw with emotions he had kept buried deep inside. He shuddered, physically reacting to the shock of how much he had unwittingly sacrificed to become a Spartan hero.

A small hand crept into his once more as Jess shifted closer to lay her head on his shoulder. "It's going to be alright, John," she whispered. They continued to lie in the grass, staring up at the stars, until late into the night, finally getting to recapture some of the joy that had been stolen from them all those years ago.

12. A Long Day Ahead

Chapter 12. A Long Day Ahead

When Jess awoke the next morning, she was still lying next to Chief, who put an arm around her at some point during the night. She sat up slowly and looked down to meet Chief's blue eyes, which did not carry the shadows they usually did.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

She nodded. "Did you?"

"I do not usually sleep much at all, but I feel good today. I did a lot of thinking last night."

"If you still have any lingering questions, I can try to answer them as best I can, but I have been kept in the dark on many things. I get on ships under assumed names when I am told and I never initiate contact with my mother. I only remained on Requiem because my ride home was attacked and destroyed."

At the reference to Halsey, Chief tensed. "Your mother has many things to explain the next time I see her."

Jess was unsure what that comment really meant, but she could tell by Chief's rigid stance that she should not ask.

"We will need to be careful today," she said, changing the subject. "We go through some open areas and a canyon that sometimes has Covenant forces. However, if we move quickly, we should be able to get to the temple by tonight."

Chief sat up and put on his helmet before turning to help Jess to her feet. They had a long day ahead.

13. Snipers

Chapter 13. Snipers

Chief and Jess approached the canyon warily. They had not seen any Covenant or Prometheans for some time now and Chief was starting to feel uneasy. It was too quiet. He shifted closer to Jess and began to scan the rocks above looking for any signs of a threat. They continued to move forward quietly, staying close to the tall walls of the canyon for cover. When they cleared the canyon, they quickly made towards a collection of rocks. Chief still had an uneasy feeling in his gut and chanced one more look behind him to ensure they were not being followed.

All it took was a glint of metal in the sun and Chief launched himself across Jess' body as the sound of a Covenant beam rifle rang out. Pain sang through Chief's body as the rifle shot hit him between his shoulder blades. His armor prevented the shot from penetrating his body, but his armor systems went haywire and his vision blurred. He stumbled toward the rocks as Jess swore and supported his body as they ran for cover. He collapsed behind the rocks and pulled Jess down next to him. While Chief struggled to remain conscious, Jess climbed onto his chest, covering his body with hers as she activated their invisibility. She yanked out his sniper rifle, balancing it on the rock in front of her, and while still perched on his body, took aim. And then darkness swallowed him.

"Chief! Chief! Wake up! Oh, please come back to me!" From far away, Chief heard the voice calling him back. At first, he thought it was Cortana, but then he felt a soft hand touch his face. _Jess_.

"I thought you didn't like to use precision weapons," he grunted as he slowly opened his eyes. The face of an angel smiled down at him, her blonde hair spilling around the two of them as she rained delighted kisses on his face. "They have their uses. I just do not prefer to use them. They are so heavy to carry around." She sobered. "You could have been killed."

"My armor is thick. I lost you once. I'm not going to risk losing you again." He sat up. "We need to move. How many were there?"

"Six."

Chief's eyebrows shot up. "Impressive."

"I would have been more pleased if they hadn't gotten a chance to shoot you at all. I was really worried, John."

He picked up her helmet and settled it back on her shoulders before

reaching for his own. "Don't worry about me. I'm pretty tough to kill."

14. Remembering Cortana

Chapter 14. Remembering Cortana

As they neared the waypoint, Jess still could not shake the lingering shock that still clung to her when she thought she might have lost the Chief. She could tell he was in pain. He moved with the same agility as he always did, but when he spoke, his voice was strained. Jess did not want to encounter any more Covenant or Promethean forces until she had a chance to examine the wound and make sure the damage was not too severe.

She pulled out a small device that she had kept in her pack. It resembled a radio, with a small antenna and only a few buttons, but it did something entirely different.

"Chief, I think we should use this now so we can reduce our visibility while we investigate this temple. I also want to check out your wound before we encounter any other enemies."

Jess could tell that Chief was about to object so she pressed on. "I know you could handle it, but I think this will be quicker and easier. Let me watch out for you on this one."

Chief nodded towards the small device. "What does that do?"

"This small device, when activated, will scramble your signal on any radars that are tracking your movements. This will make it more difficult for the Covenant and Promethean forces to recognize you are in the area. Combine that with the invisibility and we are essentially undetectable."

She paused. "The drawback is that allies will not be able to pinpoint your location either. You will still show up as an active tag, but if they came looking for you, they would not be able to find you."

Chief took the device and inspected it. "Where did you get something like this? I did notâ€" He paused and took in her armor. "Halsey gave this equipment to you didn't she? I know she was working on technology like this several years back."

She nodded. "Shall we give it a try?"

Chief pushed the button, activating the device. Chief noticed that his radar scrambled momentarily and the chatter on his com ceased. He released a breath, savoring the silence that surrounded the two of them.

After they had walked in silence for several minutes, Jess decided to ask the question that had been nagging her, but she had been too afraid to ask.

"Can you tell me about your A.I.? I was young when my mother was developing them and I never got to learn anything about them."

Chief hesitated.

"If you do not want to talk about it, you don't have to."

"No. It's alright. You deserve to know about your mother's work. I can try."

Jess nodded and waited with nervous anticipation. She could tell this was hard for him, but at the same time, she firmly believed that talking about his A.I. would be therapeutic. Chief was not a person who often expressed what he was feeling, especially through conversation.

"My A.I.'s name was Cortana. We were paired together over eight years ago. Our first mission was set up to be a failure, but we worked together so well that we succeeded. Cortana always said that the reason she chose me, aside from the typical characteristics of a successful Spartan, was that I had luck." He shrugged. "And I always did."

"What happened?"

"A.I's start to deteriorate after seven years." He paused and Jess was unsure whether he would continue.

"Rampancy," Jess finished, remembering her mother's words about A.I.s.

Chief nodded. "Yes. She got me through our final mission to stop the Didact that had escaped from Requiem. She saved my life by destroying herself."

Jess bit her lip as pain clenched her heart at what he must have felt. "I'm sorry, John."

His eyes had taken on a faraway look and Jess was unsure whether he had even heard her. "It was so hard toward the end. She was no longer the Cortana I knew. I did everything I could to keep her focused and keep her with me. I wanted to talk to Halsey to see if there was any way to save her. I never got the chance." His hand tightened into a fist and he looked down. "I failed."

Jess grabbed Chief's arm, but he seemed to be fighting an inner battle. The words had flowed out of him in a way that Jess had never seen the entire time she had been with him. He had not even been aware how much he had said. His eyes were still unfocused in memory and Jess reached up to pull his face toward hers. He finally met her eyes.

"This is not your fault, John. Cortana knew what she was doing in your final mission. It was her decision to save you."

How would you know that, Jess," Chief returned in an anguished voice. "You did not even know her."

"But I am starting to know you, John," she returned in a soft voice. "You are someone worth protecting. That's what she did for you."

Chief pulled away, torn about what she had said. He had always been

the Spartan, the soldier that looked out for humanity, without ever thinking that his life was important to anyone else.

Jess felt a connection with this A.I., Cortana. A.I.s were always assumed to be computers that analyzed data and provided tactical support, but based on what Chief had just told her, she knew that Cortana had feelings that went as deep as any human's, finally making the ultimate sacrifice to save the Spartan that she loved.

Jess knew that she was close to falling for him herself, but she could sense that any display of emotion would not be reciprocated. She would have to go slow, teaching Chief little by little what it meant to be human.

She left him to his thoughts, but not before she grabbed his hand, refusing to let go as they kept walking forward. She did not know what else she could do to prove to Chief that he was not alone in his grief.

15. The Cave

Chapter 15. The Cave

After a few hours of walking in silence, Jess saw the cave entrance that led to the sunken temple looming in the distance. They approached cautiously, carefully scoping the area for enemies. The area was silent, as Jess said it would be.

As they entered the cave, Jess looked around, once again awed by the beauty of the place. The cavern was enormous, with light pouring in from a few holes in the ceiling. Waterfalls flowed on each side of the temple, which was a silvery color with moss wrapping up the pillars. It was crumbling, but still had a powerful façade that always made Jess wonder what it had been built for.

She led Chief to the waterfall to the right of the temple. She pulled out the ladder that she had hidden in a dark rock crevice and began scaling it until she reached the level where the ledge behind the waterfall jutted out. Chief followed her up the ladder soundlessly, but Jess still found herself worrying about his injury. Once they both were behind the waterfall, Jess pulled the ladder up and rolled it up in the corner.

Chief raised an eyebrow. "I do not want to know how you got up here the first time."

Jess smiled. "It did take awhile, but it was worth it."

She pulled out her supplies that she had stashed in the cave and laid a thick blanket out to sit on. Colonies of luminescent bacteria lined the walls, creating a soft glow in the cavern. Despite being a few feet from the waterfall, it was dry. Chief sat down, finally relaxing and letting his weariness show.

Jess shuffled forward, putting aside his helmet and beginning to undo the gears that held his chest and back armor in place. Chief tried to stop her hands, mumbling that he was fine, but Jess would not be deterred.

As the pieces of armor fell away, Jess sat back and stared in shock. She had expected Chief to have battle scars, but she could not believe that he had so many. Little scars from bullet wounds dotted his chest and a wicked scar from what looked like a sword swept up his torso. His back was no better; countless old wounds marred his white skin. When she saw the damage the beam rifle shot had done to the middle of his shoulder blades, she sighed deeply in sympathy. The shot he took surely would have seriously injured or killed her. While his armor protected him from most of the damage, the wound was severely burned and Jess knew it needed to be treated to avoid infection.

Jess reached into her supplies and mixed up a salve that would clean and soothe the wound. She wrinkled her nose as the smell of the salve spread through the cave.

Chief looked over his shoulder and eyed the salve skeptically. "That stuff stinks."

Jess smirked, glad to see the smell was distracting him. "This might hurt a bit at first, but it should help ease the pain."

Chief nodded. "Do it."

Jess tenderly applied the salve to the wound, wincing as she saw Chief's jaw clench and his shoulder muscles tense. She dressed the wound and then lightly put her hand on Chief's arm. "You will need to sleep on your side tonight, but you should feel much better tomorrow."

Chief nodded again. "Thank you."

Jess continued to kneel behind Chief, unable to tear her eyes away from his back now that her task was complete. She reached out and laid her hand on one of the scars, her fingers lightly tracing the ragged skin. Chief sucked in a breath but he did not stop her.

She continued to trace each of the scars silently. Chief would occasionally tell her what had caused that particular scar, but he mostly remained still while she touched his skin. She then leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to one of the scars on his shoulder blade. Chief jumped and shifted away from her.

She sat back and looked down at her hands, now still and clasped in her lap.

Chief did not say a word and remained motionless as if trying to absorb what had just happened. The only sound in the cave was the dull roar of the waterfall. Jess waited for Chief to make the next move.

After a few minutes, Chief shifted close to Jess again. He was now kneeling and facing her. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm not sure what you want me to do."

Jess's eyes softened as she met his. She slowly lifted a hand and placed it on his chest over his heart. It beat strongly against her palm. "You don't have to do anything. Just feel."

Again, Jess moved her hands over his skin, tracing the scars that

were scattered across his chest and torso. She shifted closer and she heard Chief suck in a breath. She moved her lips over his chest, allowing her breath to whisper on his skin before she placed another kiss on the pulse that was beating at his neck. "It is alright to feel something, Chief. Let yourself be human."

She returned her hand to his heart and looked up to meet his eyes, which burned into hers. "You are not a machine, Chief. Just feel." She slid her hand up and cupped his jaw.

He closed his eyes and she eased her hand into his dark hair and placed a kiss on his lips. Chief did not move and so she passed her lips over the scar under his eye and whispered encouragement until she returned her mouth to his.

This time, Chief was ready and he slowly reached out a hand to pull her closer as his mouth softened and responded to hers. Jess' hands dropped to his shoulders which had lost their tension. He continued to kiss her before finally pulling away and resting his forehead against hers.

He then laid down on the ground and pulled her with him, tucking her against his side as his breathing deepened and peaceful sleep began to overtake him. Jess nestled closer and smiled to herself. _He had kissed her back._

16. Exploring the Temple

Chapter 16. Exploring the Temple

The next morning, Chief slowly opened his eyes. Jess was still nestled against his chest, her blonde hair spilling over his arm. He rose slowly, being careful not to wake her. He walked to the edge of the cavern and sat at the edge, letting the cool spray of the waterfall hit his face. His back still ached a little bit, but it was much better. He would have to ask Jess what was in that nasty stuff. _Jess. _It amazed him how much that woman had turned his beliefs upside down in such a short time. He still remembered the soft touch of her hands on his skin and the taste of her lips on his mouth. For the first time, he felt truly alive. He was not going through the motions of an elite soldier, somehow surviving from mission to mission. Instead, he was simply a man that was spending time with a woman, discovering things about himself that he never knew.

Memories of his youth had resurfaced, reminding himself of the intense feelings he had experienced before time and constant warfare had hardened him into a soldier that often forgot what it was like to feel pain or pleasure. The loss of Cortana had made him raw, but being with Jess had been a balm that was slowly healing the wounds. He knew he would eventually be called back to service, but for now, he had her, and he was going to enjoy every second. He glanced back at Jess to find that she was awake. She was hugging her knees, her chin resting on top as she watched him. She smiled tentatively.

Jess had woken up as soon as Chief had moved away, but she sensed that he needed some time to think. So she waited. And when Chief did finally turn around, she saw an expression on his face that she had not seen before. He looked rested and content. Her heart stirred as she hoped that his expression was at least somewhat because of her.

She rose and went to sit next to him, shivering involuntarily as the cold water droplets hit her face. To her surprise, Chief wrapped an arm around her and drew her closer.

They sat that way for several minutes, enjoying each other's company without a need for words. The grumbling of Jess' stomach suddenly roared over the sound of the waterfall, causing a gasp of surprised laughter to erupt from Chief. He got to his feet and led her to their supplies, before pulling out a ration that they could share. Jess took what he offered, her cheeks still flaming with embarrassment.

"It's okay, Jess. I was starting to get a little hungry too," he murmured. Jess frowned, not placated by his words since they both knew they were blatantly untrue. They finished eating in silence and then after Jess had applied more of the salve to Chief's back, they left the cave.

Once on the ground, Chief turned to Jess. "While I'd like to stay off the grid completely as long as possible, I want to monitor com chatter in case there is something we need to know."

Jess nodded, inordinately pleased by Chief's pained expression at the thought of being back on the radar. While she did not want Chief to be sent on other missions, she understood the logic behind his statement. They needed to know if there were major events that required action.

As Chief reactivated his com equipment, Jess began exploring the cave. Most of the walls were bare, but at the entrance of the temple, Forerunner symbols were scattered across the pillars and above the entrance. Chief joined Jess as she bent to inspect some of the symbols more closely. She did not understand much the text, but there was one symbol that kept coming up. She ran her finger over the curves and lines, unsure what to make of it.

"This symbol keeps coming up. Have you ever seen it before?" she asked. Chief leaned over her shoulder to inspect the figure.

"That is the symbol for the Librarian." He looked up at the temple. "This isn't where I encountered her though."

"The Librarian?"

Chief nodded. "She is the wife of Didact and is the archiver of all Forerunner history. Your mother thinks that she has the key to unlocking Forerunner technology."

Jess looked impressed. "Well maybe she will have the answer you seek."

Chief nodded, suddenly energized by the possibility of talking to the Librarian again. Halsey must not have known that he had spoken to the Didact once before. He wondered if she even knew he was alive since he was ordered not to speak with her. The symbol Jess had found matched the symbol in Halsey's notes; they were definitely in the right place. He led the way inside the temple, taking out his DMR just in case. Jess secured her armor and followed soundlessly behind him.

The temple was a made up of a single, cavernous room with a large hole at the top where light filtered in. The hairs on the back of Chief's neck stood up. He had been in rooms like this before.

Jess gasped and lifted her pistol as crawlers began to pour in from the ceiling. Standing back to back, Jess and Chief began to take down the Prometheans. They seemed to be everywhere, but Jess could sense that Chief was doing some severe damage to their number, judging by the glowing orange embers that floated through the air from their dissolving bodies. For some reason, the Prometheans unnerved Jess more than the Covenant ever did. It must be because of how quick and unpredictable they were. However, they were no match for the Chief, who continued to plow them down as Jess covered his back.

When the last crawler fell, they quickly approached the console at the center of the room. Chief pushed a few buttons and a huge map of Requiem erupted from the console, filling the room with light.

"How did you do that?" Jess asked breathlessly. Chief shrugged, not at all winded from their recent struggle. "Cortana taught me a few things about accessing information over the years." He inspected the map, noticing the symbol for the Librarian in multiple locations across the planet. One location had a symbol, larger than the rest, marked. He pressed additional buttons on the console, causing the map to narrow on the location. It matched the map from Halsey's report.

Chief pointed to that location. "I think that is one of the main terminals to access the Librarian. I accessed another, on the other side of the planet. We should go there for more information. It appears to be close to where we are." Chief marked the coordinates and paused, surprised. "It is actually within this temple, through a series of corridors."

Jess eyed the door at the back of the room, knowing that that was where they were headed. She took a deep breath, preparing herself for a day of fighting Prometheans.

Chief shut down the terminal. "We had better go, before the crawlers return and bring Knights with them."

Jess nodded, quickly following Chief out of the temple room and into the darkened hallways behind it.

17. UNSC Infinity

**Chapter 17. UNSC Infinity **

"Is this Librarian the one my mother mentioned in her notes?" Jess whispered as they wound their way through the darkened hallways, following the path that Chief had programmed into his tracking system.

Chief nodded, his body alert as they rounded another corner. Jess activated her invisibility armor and slipped in front of him to silently dispatch the Knight that appeared in front of them with her throwing knife. They were trying to make as little noise as possible to avoid detection, but the Prometheans kept appearing in small numbers from thin air.

As they wound their way through the maze of corridors, Jess was grateful to have the sophisticated tracking equipment that was built into the Chief's armor. Her armor was more tailored to avoid detection, not navigate large underground tunnels.

They were deep within the tunnels and had not encountered any Promethean forces for some time when Chief's com crackled to life. It was a distress call from Captain Lasky—the UNSC Infinity had been attacked, and boarded, by Promethean and Covenant forces. All Spartans and ODSs that were able to return to the ship were ordered to abort their missions and provide immediate assistance. Chief scanned his radar and com to determine whether any forces were in the area where he could hitch a ride back to the ship, but none were nearby.

Chief looked over at Jess, who had gone rigid with worry. "I need to get back to that ship. We must move faster to see if the Librarian knows of a portal we can use to get closer to the Infinity."

"Chief, I—I would like to help, but I really don't think I should return with you to the ship."

"Jess, you can't stay here forever. Captain Lasky is a good man and he will be able to help. I can protect you," he paused. "I could also use your help."

Jess looked up at Chief as he stood silently, waiting for her decision. She knew that Chief was worried about Captain Lasky and the ship. She also knew that she could not hide on Requiem forever. It was a hostile planet, and leaving under the protection of the Chief, who had actually requested her aid and who she wanted to stay with anyway, finally allowed her to put her fears behind her and decide to move forward with her life. No more hiding.

She took a step forward and put her hand on her chest, looking up into the deep orange of Chief's visor, wishing she could see his face at this moment. "I'll go with you. Lead the way."

Chief nodded once, silently accepting her decision and offer of aid. They began to run through the corridors, pausing momentarily to scan the area for enemies, but most seemed to be engaged in the attack on the Infinity. After an hour of winding through the darkened halls, they approached their waypoint, when Chief's radar began to light up with not Promethean, but Covenant forces.

Chief's com crackled to life a second time. The attack on the Infinity had been halted, but it had been staged as a "smash and grab" in order to kidnap Dr. Halsey from the ship. As more intel streamed through Chief's high security com, Jess gripped his arm in anxiety at the mention of her mother's name.

As Chief pondered where the Covenant and the Prometheans would be taking Halsey, Jess intruded on his thoughts. "Chief, we must do something! Where could they be taking her? What can we do? Oh, we must do something—" she trailed off, starting to wring her hands with worry.

Chief's voice cut through her hysteria. "Jess. I need you to focus right now. She may very well be brought to this temple, since she has

been studying the Librarian and even the Covenant are aware of her reputation as a scientist. There are many Covenant forces nearby. Let's plan our next move so if she is brought here, we are ready."

Jess paused and bit her lip as she absorbed what Chief had just said to her. "Okay. You're right. I can only be helpful if I can think clearly."

Jess took a deep breath and composed herself. Chief put a hand on her shoulder and looked down at her. "I will do what I can to protect her, Jess."

"I know you will. So what do we do next?"

Chief reviewed his map and noticed there was an alcove where they could go to see the entire room where the Librarian was reportedly housed. He led the way toward the area, Jess silently following in his wake. When they reached the alcove some time later, they crouched and crept to the edge.

The sight in the room made Jess suck in a breath in shock. About 20 Elites moved hurriedly around the area as if they were preparing for something. In the center of the room stood a tall structure that shown with blue light within the protective shield that surrounded it.

"They need Halsey to deactivate the shield," Chief murmured. "They will be bringing her here. Prepare yourself. Right now, we wait."

18. The Librarian

Chapter 18. The Librarian

Jess did not know how long they laid flat in the alcove, waiting. The tension in her body was almost unbearable. She was amazed at how still Chief was. For a man so prone to action, he was remarkably good at waiting. Sensing her unease, he reached over and placed his hand over hers.

They continued to observe the activity in the room, which had continued to grow more frenzied the longer they waited. Chief left his hand over Jess' while they waited, and Jess allowed his strength to flow into her. She did not know how she would react to seeing her mother after such a long time, especially under these circumstances, but she knew how much Chief needed her to be mentally ready for whatever was to come.

A burst of activity at the doorway opposite the alcove drew their attention. Halsey was led in by a group of Elites, including the Covenant terror leader, Jul Mdama. She appeared to be unharmed. Jul began addressing Halsey in Sangheili, a language she seemed to understand. As they approached the shielded structure, she eyed Jul in surprise.

"Glassman did this?" She said in shock. She then paused to think and continued to mumble to herself as she grabbed the data pad Jul was holding. After entering some commands, the shield disappeared and

Halsey ran into the structure, to the dismay of Jul.

Chief glanced over at Jess to see how she was handling this. She was tense, but turned to face him, ready for orders. Before Chief could speak, the room erupted with the sound of gunfire. Spartan Thorne from Fireteam Majestic ran into the room, quickly followed by other Fireteam members and Commander Palmer. They began taking down Elites with their pistols and assault rifles. Chief geared up, preparing to join the fray. At the same time, Halsey was released from the structure, gripping two small metal bars. She threw one of the pieces to Spartan Thorne as Jul grabbed her other arm and shouted triumphantly at what he saw.

Commander Palmer then raised her pistol and took aim at Jul, or so Chief and Jess thought, until she shot Halsey in the arm. Jess bit back a scream of anguish as Chief ducked back down, confusion slamming into him. Fireteam Majestic and Commander Palmer were not on a rescue mission? Disbelief warred with what his eyes were telling him to be true. Palmer did not miss at that range. Palmer raised her pistol again, as Chief made the decision to take countermeasures, damn the consequences. It was not right for Spartans to execute civilians and he could not bear to have Jess see her own mother executed in front of her.

In that instant, a Knight suddenly appeared, enveloping Jul and Halsey in its arms before teleporting out of the room. Chief lowered his weapon and remained out of sight as Palmer shrieked in agitation. She whirled on Fireteam Majestic. "Why are you here?" she demanded.

"Captain Lasky sent us to rescue her."

"Rescue her?" Palmer fired back. "That woman is a traitor."

Spartan Thorne held up his hand. "If that is the case, why was she so determined that I get this?"

Momentary silence reigned in the room as the group inspected the artifact in Thorne's palm. Palmer was the first to react. She ordered everyone back to the evac point to investigate the artifact and determine what to do next. As they cleared out of the room, Chief backed away to check on Jess, who was huddled in the hall, shaken up by what she had just witnessed.

Chief squatted down next to her and removed her helmet. Green eyes, wet with unshed tears, looked up at him. "They tried to kill her, Chief. And called her a traitor. How could they?"

Chief shook his head, as much at a loss as she. "I don't know, Jess. But it is something I plan to find out. I need to talk to the Librarian to determine what she gave Halsey."

He stood and held out his hand to help Jess to her feet. She leaned into him longer than was necessary, but she drew strength from his presence. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and let her compose herself.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded and put on her helmet as they descended into the now empty

room. The structure still glowed with a bluish hue. "Are you sure it's safe?"

Chief shrugged. "Only one way to find out. Activate your armor while I'm in there."

As soon as Chief entered the blue structure, sparks of energy flew through the ceiling and Jess saw Chief's body become immobilized.

Chief was greeted by the all-knowing gaze of the Librarian. "You have returned, John 117. I'm sorry your A.I. is no longer with you. I wish I had more to say."

Chief looked down to hide his disappointment that she had no words for him about Cortana. "You gave me answers once. I hope you will do so again."

"Do you want answers about Catherine Halsey, or her daughter, who waits for you outside?"

Chief eyed the Librarian with surprise. "Catherine Halsey. I will learn about Jess on my own."

The Librarian smiled. "Very well. I gave Catherine a two piece key, that when fitted together, reveals all of the locations of Forerunner technology in the galaxy. As I told her, we did not create so much without developing a way to keep track of it all. However, when the two pieces are separated, they are inert and no information can be pulled from them." She paused. "This key must not fall into the wrong hands, John 117. Remain strong. Humanity will need you in the times ahead."

Chief nodded and turned to leave. "One more thing, John. Send in Jess. I have something to say to her."

Chief was released from the chamber and launched into Jess' arms. She patted him up and down as if to reassure herself that he was alright.

"I have the information I need." He turned back to the glowing structure. "She asked to see you."

With Chief's encouragement, Jess swallowed and cautiously approached the structure. As she stepped inside, her surroundings melted away and a Forerunner being that Jess immediately knew was the Librarian gazed down upon her.

Jess was speechless. She had been on this planet for quite a while and had become familiar with some of the Forerunner lore, but she had never thought she would encounter one of the superior beings.

"Jessica Halsey. I have wanted to speak with you for some time now."

"You have?" Jess replied dumbly, still recovering from her shock.

The Librarian nodded her head. "Yes I have. There are a few things

you need to know about yourself and about John 117."

Jess waited, unsure what the Librarian was going to tell her.

"John 117 encountered me once before some months back. My husband, the Didact, was determined to destroy the human race using the Composer and I knew that John was humanity's only chance. I changed him so that the Composer would not be able to destroy him. However, in doing so, I think he felt even more distant from humanity than ever before." She paused and gave Jess a significant look.

"Has he told you about his A.I., Cortana?"

Jess nodded. "Only a little. He told me about his time with her here on Requiem, but not much more."

"I encountered Cortana shortly before John when they were last on Requiem. She told me about herself and how she knew she would never be able to reach Halsey to treat her rampancy."

"It was sad what happened to her. I know Chief grieves for her." Jess sighed, recalling how much pain Chief kept buried inside. "Do you know what I can do to help?"

The Librarian expanded out her arms. "That is why I requested that you see me. Now, my suspicions are confirmed." She paused. "You and Cortana have many things in common. I think that while Cortana was created from a scan of your mother's brain, she turned out much more like you."

Jess bit her lip as she digested those words.

The Librarian continued. "You are what he needs to prepare for the challenges ahead. While Requiem's time may be at an end, humanity's is not. John 117 will be needed."

"Chief and I were close as children. Maybe my mother sought to make Cortana like me to help Chief through his training when I had to be sent away," Jess mused, still reeling from shock.

"Always remember that. When John is tested, he will need someone to help him find his way back." The Librarian began to fade away and Jess felt herself returning to reality. She was launched from the structure and landed against Chief's solid chest.

Chief steadied her. "What did she have to tell you?"

Jess gripped his arms and debated how much to tell him. "She had some personal advice for me that I need to think through. It is not directly related to our current mission." She trailed off, not saying more.

Chief waited. "Jess."

Jess sighed. "She wants me to look out for you, Chief. I have more in common with Cortana than we initially thought."

Chief's arms dropped. "What does that mean? She told me there was nothing to say." His voice had taken on a ragged edge that Jess now knew was vulnerability.

"I don't think we should talk about this now. I don't really know what it means yet either. Please give me some time to think. I will tell you when we finish our mission." She changed the subject. "What did you learn?"

Chief relented. He knew Jess was right; he did not think he could talk about Cortana right now and still remain as focused as he needed to be. "Halsey was right about a key. The Librarian gave it to her. It's a map to all Forerunner technology in the galaxy."

Jess sat back, surprised and shaken. "Well she gave it to Spartan Thorne so why did that Elite still take her?"

"He thought she still held the key. It is in two parts. Only when the parts are joined can you see the map. She tossed one piece to Spartan Thorne but held on to the other. She still has a bargaining chip."

"She is not going to be happy that she gave that piece to Spartan Thorne. That one Spartan tried to kill her." Jess shook her head as if trying to clear it from that awful memory.

Chief nodded. "She will be bitter from the betrayal. I am hoping that she can convince Jul Mdama that she can be an asset to him, particularly because the UNSC has deserted her."

Jess sucked in a breath. "Do you think she would actually turn her back on the UNSC?"

"I'm not sure." Chief shrugged. "They have not been kind to her these past few years. But I am hoping that does not cause her to turn her back on humanity."

"We have to save her, Chief. We need to show her that not everyone has turned their back."

"I will do what I can. We need to talk to Captain Lasky. He has always been a protector of Halsey. We can talk to him about what to do next."

As he was speaking, the ground they were standing on shook violently, causing Jess to stumble forward before Chief grabbed her. The ceiling of the room began to crack above them. They both started running towards the door at the end of the room as large pieces of the ceiling began to fall, one crushed the structure that Jess and Chief had entered to talk to the Librarian. It erupted in a shower of sparks, but Jess and Chief did not look back as they raced towards the door. Slabs of rock fell all around them, but they continued to run, finally reaching the door and emerging into bright sunlight as the temple fell.

Jess whirled to look at Chief, the ground was still shaking. "What is that?" she asked Chief with concern. "The ground has never shaken like this while I have been on this planet."

Chief put a hand to his com and radioed for Lasky. Roland, the UNSC Infinity's A.I., answered. "Chief. We have a problem. Lasky cannot talk right now, but I can fill you in."

"Alright, Roland. What's going on?" Chief asked.

"The Forerunner artifact we have on our ship is communicating with the artifacts on Requiem and holding us in the planet's orbit." He paused. "That would not necessarily be a problem, except that the Covenant has put Requiem on a collision course with the sun and the planet is dragging us with it."

"How can we free the ship so we can get off this planet?" Chief asked.

"Fireteams Crimson and Majestic have already been sent to deactivate the other artifacts, but they could use assistance since we don't have much time. Fireteam Majestic is closest to your location. I will send you a waypoint. Once you deactivate the artifact, hop on a Pelican with them and get the heck out of there."

"Understood. I have the waypoint. Contact me if anything changes."

"Will do. Good luck, Chief."

"What's going on?" Jess asked with concern.

"Requiem is on a collision course with the sun and there are artifacts that are keeping the UNSC Infinity from leaving its orbit. I got a waypoint to help Fireteam Majestic deactivate one of the artifacts so that we can leave before the planet is destroyed."

Jess gaped in shock. "Let's move, then," she replied grimly.

They ran across the sandy desert that sprawled outside of the temple towards the waypoint. Jess was grateful for the drastic change in terrain because it was much faster to move through the open area than through the thick forest that surrounded the other side of the now destroyed temple.

As they neared the waypoint, Chief's radar screen began to light up with red dots. A sizeable contingent of Elites and Prometheans surrounded the building where the waypoint indicated Fireteam Majestic and Commander Palmer were located. Chief and Jess ducked behind a cluster of rocks. Jess activated her invisibility armor, unsheathed her throwing knives, and reloaded her pistol. Chief propped the sniper rifle on the rocks to get a better view of the enemy.

The planet was close to the sun now and the heat was almost unbearable. Rivulets of sweat ran down the back of Jess' neck as she turned to the Chief.

"I am only helping you with this so we can safely get off this planet. You will need to provide cover for that one Spartan because I have no desire to protect her after what she did to my mother."

"I understand. Just focus on the Covenant and Prometheans for now. When we return to the Infinity, we will talk to Captain Lasky about what to do. No one can know about your identity until then." He paused. "I will help you figure this out."

Jess squeezed Chief's hand and then activated her armor. "I know you

will, Chief."

"We need to clear out this area so that when the Fireteam deactivates the artifact we can get off this planet. We are running out of time."

Chief then began taking out some of the larger Elites that remained while Jess used her throwing knives to kill the grunts. She could not resist assassinating one of the Elites in the way she had practiced with Chief, swiftly climbing up its back and driving her final knife into its neck. Chief was dealing with some of the Promethean Knights. He rapidly fired several DMR shots into the Knight, causing it to disintegrate into a shower of orange dust.

Chief and Jess continued to take down the enemy forces, but the enemies just kept coming. Jess could not believe that the forces were willing to stay and fight when they had to recognize that the planet was rapidly plummeting towards the sun. But she kept fighting, hoping that the Spartans would emerge soon so they could get off the planet in time.

Jess turned to check on the Chief, just in time to see several crawlers approaching him from behind. She ran forward firing several pistol shots into their brains before they could shoot Chief in the back. However, one crawler turned and fired a scattershot at close range and it tore through Jess' armor, sending pain shooting up her left arm. She gasped as her vision blurred but she kept fighting, doing her best to guard Chief's back as he downed enemy after enemy. When the last of the Knights fell and Chief had destroyed the remaining watchers, the area became quiet.

Chief turned to check on Jess and discovered her condition. Her arm hung limply at her side, but she still remained conscious and could stand upright. He escorted her to the Pelican and buckled her in just as Fireteam Majestic reported that the last artifact was deactivated and they were clearing the area.

Chief stood outside the Pelican and continued to watch for further enemies as Fireteam Majestic emerged from the building. He nodded to the team and ducked into the hold to ride with Jess as Palmer buckled in to pilot the Pelican. They dodged falling debris before jerkily landing on the UNSC Infinity. The ship then quickly pulled away from the sun and the heat faded as they went through a space jump to escape.

Now that the fighting had ceased, Jess was acutely aware of the fire that was raging inside her arm. Chief unbuckled her seat belt and helped her to her feet. Dizziness blurred her vision as she struggled to stand; she must have lost more blood than she thought. Instead of wasting time trying to help her walk, Chief swept her into his arms and immediately moved towards the medical wing, ignoring the curious stares from the other Spartans and the suspicious glance of Commander Palmer.

By the time he reached the medical wing, it was already buzzing with activity due to the injuries that had been sustained during the space jump. However, Chief managed to use his size to gain enough attention to have a doctor attend to Jess.

As the doctor bent to peel away the burnt pieces of armor, Jess

passed out. Chief carried Jess to one of the medical beds so that the doctor could continue his work. Fear gripped Chief as he removed Jess' helmet and gazed at her pale face. He had not thought the injury was severe, but as the doctor peeled the armor back, he noticed that some of the scattershot particles had eaten through a piece of the chest plate, damaging both Jess' arm and her side. There was blood everywhere, and there was nothing Chief could do except hope. He was uncomfortably aware that he had been faced with a similar situation not too long ago. He had hoped that he could find Halsey and fix Cortana, but he had failed. Now, he had managed to get Jess off of Requiem, but she had sustained serious injuries while fighting at his side.

Another doctor approached the bed and hooked Jess up to an IV and heart monitor. Her pulse was weak, but regular and Chief breathed a little easier. The doctor stitched up Jess' side and wrapped it in bandages. Once he finished, he rechecked Jess vital signs and smiled faintly. He put a hand on Chief's shoulder. "She is going to be fine. We have sedated her, but she should be awake and feeling a bit better by tomorrow."

Chief nodded his thanks and removed his helmet as he sat beside the bed. He picked up Jess' hand and clasped it in his own. He knew he would need to go talk to Captain Lasky, but he could not get himself to move from Jess' side just yet. So instead, Chief sat in the chair, holding Jess' hand, until he slumped forward and fell asleep, his head resting on the edge of the bed.

19. Recovery

Chapter 19. Recovery

Jess awoke to find Chief, slumped over the bed, fast asleep and holding her hand. She could not help but smile. There were several times during the night when the pain threatened to return, but she had always sensed that Chief was near and that comfort miraculously chased the pain away. She brushed her fingers through his brown hair and marveled to herself at how much different he looked in sleep. His face was relaxed and looked years younger. She knew he would have a vicious pain in his neck when he awoke so she gently started to massage the area as Chief slowly began to awaken.

He grasped Jess' hand and held it to his face as she smiled. "I'm alright, Chief. Thanks for staying with me."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm a bit sore, but I feel much better. Hopefully I will be good as new in a few days."

Chief nodded with satisfaction and beckoned a doctor over to check on Jess. The doctor reported that her vitals looked good and the wound showed no signs of infection.

"I need to go talk to Captain Lasky now that you're doing a little better. I will return shortly."

"Alright, Chief." She paused and a mischievous look lit in her eyes. "Can you lean a little closer?"

Chief obeyed and leaned closer. "Yes?"

Jess placed a kiss on his cheek and smiled up at him.

Chief stood up quickly, surprised by her show of affection in the busy medical wing, but no one seemed to have noticed. Jess continued to smile innocently and shooed him out, assuring him she would be fine. Chief hurried out and went in search of Lasky, wondering when he would finally be the one to surprise her.

20. Captain Lasky

Chapter 20. Captain Lasky

Captain Lasky looked up from the ship's controls as Chief entered the room, requesting an audience with him. Lasky welcomed him and walked over to a deserted part of the bridge so they could have a private conversation.

"I heard you arrived onboard with Fireteam Majestic but were occupied watching over an injured woman in the medical wing. How is she?"

"Better. She should be able to move around the ship in a few days."

"Good. I'm glad she is alright." He met Chief's gaze steadily. "Who is she?"

Chief turned and stared out the bridge window into the mix of stars. "Her identity must be kept a secret from the others, for her own protection, but you deserve to know."

Lasky paused. "I understand."

"Her name is Jessica Halsey. She was reported to have died when she was a teenager due to a Covenant air strike. Instead, she has been hiding on various ships and planets for her own protection due to her mother's reputation." He took a deep breath. "When I encountered her on Requiem, I didn't know it was her at first, but after some time, I recognized her. When we found out what was happening to Requiem, we knew she had to come with me, but she was scared to do so."

"Protection? On Requiem?" Lasky sputtered in disbelief.

"I think she was marooned there. I do not think it was her intention to stay. She never mentioned what happened."

Lasky's gaze narrowed. "Does she know about her mother?"

Chief frowned. "She saw Palmer attempt to execute her. It caused her great pain. Why was that order given, Captain? Halsey is a civilian."

"Some of the UNSC leaders had deemed her a traitor and a threat for her expertise, disrespect for authority, and willingness to communicate with the Covenant in her quest for knowledge. I had hoped

to work things out, but Sarah was determined to follow orders. I sent Fireteam Majestic on a rescue mission, but they did not succeed."

Chief nodded. "We were there to hear them argue about it. I found out more about the artifact that Spartan Thorne brought back. According to the Librarian, what Halsey threw to Spartan Thorne is just one piece of a two part mechanism that reveals the locations of all Forerunner technology in the galaxy. She threw one piece to Spartan Thorne and was kidnapped by Jul Mdama with the other piece." He clenched a fist. "She tried to help us, Captain. After being shot at by our Spartans, I don't expect her to be so forgiving."

Lasky sighed and pressed a hand to his temple. "She found out you were still alive and slapped me for not telling her. Combine that with her treatment as a war criminal and attempted execution, she may be hell-bent on revenge. And who can blame her?"

"No one told her I was alive? Is that why I was told to stay away from her?"

Lasky lifted his shoulders helplessly. "I'm not sure why that decision was made to keep her in the dark. It certainly angered her. I think she does care for you, in some odd way of hers."

"We need to get her back. She has the other piece of the Forerunner map and her knowledge is invaluable for the war with the Covenant."

Lasky looked at him with sad eyes. "And she may know something about Cortana."

Chief straightened his shoulders and loomed over Lasky. "Halsey has the answers to many questions I still want. I have kept my distance per UNSC orders, but I will have trouble standing by to watch her execution. I have many questions for Halsey, and I made a promise to Jess. This is not just about Cortana—there is more to it than that now."

Lasky put a hand on Chief's shoulder. "I will do anything I can to help you find Halsey—and to protect Jess. According to Fireteam Majestic, that woman has your back. I am glad for that. I will continue to work with Roland to scan frequencies for any sign of Jul Mdama's ship. I'll let you know if we have something."

Lasky left Chief on the deck of the ship, lost in his thoughts. He had returned to Requiem for what purpose? He had felt like his mission there was unfinished and he knew deep down that he hoped to find out more about Cortana. He could still return to Installation 03, but he did not know whether he would find anything further there. He felt that the answer about whether Cortana was truly gone lay either with the Librarian or with Halsey. He now had access to neither. However, he had identified the key Halsey referred to in her journals and he knew that it would be imperative to keep it from the hands of the Covenant.

Overall, his mission had been a failure. Halsey was being held captive, if she was still alive; one piece of the Forerunner key was in the hands of Jul Mdama; and Requiem, one of the last places Chief had been with Cortana, was now destroyed. Except that Chief did not

feel like the mission had failed because he had found _her. _He felt disloyal to Cortana for caring so much for Jess so soon, but he did not think Cortana would want him to wallow in grief forever. He would always continue to search for Cortana, but he would not lock himself away into a machine-like existence to block the emotions. Jess had brought him one step closer to humanity and he was going to try and embrace all of the pleasure-and pain-that came with it.

21. The Way Back

Chapter 21. The Way Back

A few days later, Jess finally felt well enough to walk around. Her left arm was in a sling and she could not wear her armor so Chief had commandeered some suitable clothing for a walk around the ship. Chief had tried his best to keep her company, but he had many obligations as he worked with Captain Lasky to track Jul Mdama's ship. Jess thought she would go crazy if she did not escape the medical wing, at least for a little while.

As Jess walked alongside Chief down the ship's quiet corridors, she sensed that he was deep in thought. So, she just contented herself with his silent company and relished the first feeling of freedom she had experienced in several days. She had kept her interactions with others to a minimum as her identity needed to remain a secret with tensions still high about her mother. While she had plenty of fake identities that she could pull from, she did not want to take any risks until Chief and Lasky had time to think through the situation. As a result, she had become stir crazy. She had thought she would enjoy being with people again after spending so much time alone on Requiem, but instead she felt smothered. She found Chief's quiet company soothing on her frayed nerves. She tightened her grip on his arm as she sighed contentedly.

Chief looked down at her in concern. "Am I walking too fast for you?"

Jess looked up and met Chief's blue eyes. He had left his armor on, but had removed his helmet during their walk around the ship. She smiled at him. "No, you're doing fine. This is the first moment's peace I've had in a while and I am enjoying it."

Chief relaxed and resumed their walk. "It's nice for me too. Jul Mdama is clever and we have not been able to uncover any sign of him. Palmer is suspicious of what I was doing on Requiem and I tire of answering her questions." He sighed in frustration. "We all want to find Dr. Halsey. She knows so much and we need to talk to her again. She is important. Why can't everyone just recognize that? It is exhausting."

Jess stopped Chief with her hand and turned him to face her. "She is my mother, Chief. I want to find her too, but I understand everyone had different reasons for wanting her back. To me, only your reasons matter. She has many questions to answer about why she acted the way she did with regards to us. She has many questions to answer for why she communicated with Jul Mdama." She squeezed his hand. "And she may still have answers about Cortana."

Chief let out a breath. "I would like to have answers from her about

Cortana. I do not feel the loss of Cortana as badly as I did before, but I cannot make myself give up looking for ways to bring her back. I must try everything before I can move forward."

"I know, John. I think it is time I tell you what the Librarian told me."

Chief remained quiet, tensely waiting for her to continue.

"She told me that while Cortana was created from my mother's brain, she ended up more like me. She also warned me that you would be needed in the times ahead. You will always be a soldier, Chief. But you are not, and never will be, a machine. I know you won't stop looking for Cortana and I know you won't stop fighting when humanity needs you." She looked up into Chief's eyes. "But when you start feeling like you are losing touch with who you are" she put a hand on his chest. "I will always be here to help you find your way back. Just as Cortana knew you and supported you, so will I."

Chief did not speak. Instead, he picked up Jess' right hand and placed a kiss on each finger, his gaze never leaving her face. "There are no words to describe how your words make me feel." He paused, pulling her closer and leaning his head down. "This is how I feel." He caught her lips in a kiss that spoke of the sorrow and pain for what was ahead, but also tasted of the joy and comfort they had found with each other, however briefly. He pulled back and Jess traced his mouth with her finger, her heart twisting.

He led her to one of the windows and they looked out at the galaxy that glimmered faintly with stars. Jess leaned her head on his shoulder and held on to Chief's hand, knowing that their time together would end. For today, John 117 was hers, but someday"and she knew that day was coming soon"he would be called back in to action. And she knew that she would be waiting for him when he needed to find his way back.

End
file.